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Video-game addiction a real problem, study finds

About 8.5 percent of youths affected, according to researcher

By Donna St. George
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WASHINGTON — A new study concludes that children can become addicted to playing video games, with some youths skimping on homework, lying about how much they play and struggling, without success, when they try to cut back.

In what is described as the first nationally representative study in the U.S. on the subject, researcher Douglas Gentile of Iowa State University found that 8.5 percent of American youths ages 8 to 18 who play video games show multiple signs of behavioral addiction. "For some kids, they play in such a way that it becomes out of balance. And they're damaging other areas of their lives; it isn't just one area, it's many areas," said Gentile.

To get at gaming addiction, he adapted diagnostic criteria for pathological gambling into a series of questions about video game use. The questions became part of a 2007 Harris Poll survey of 1,178 children and teens. Gamers were deemed "pathological" if they reported at least six of the 11 symptoms.

Symptoms included spending increasing amounts of time and money on video games to feel the same level of excitement; irritability or restlessness when play is scaled back; skipping chores or homework to play; and lying about the length of playing time.

Gentile said he started his research with doubts about the possibility of addiction.

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"I thought this was parental histrionics—that kids are playing a lot and parents don't understand the motivation, so they label it an addiction," he said. "It turns out that I was wrong." What he found, he said, was that pathological gamers did worse in school, had trouble paying attention in class and reported feeling "addicted." Four times as many boys as girls were considered pathological gamers.

The study found that 88 percent of the nation's children ages 8 to 18 play video games. With 45 million children of that age in the country, the study would suggest that more than 3 million are addicted "or at least have problems of the magnitude" that call for help, Gentile said.

Gentile's research findings leave many questions unresolved; for example, whether pathological game-playing causes poor school performance or whether "children who have trouble at school seek to play games to experience feelings of mastery."